Comfort is the death knell of academia: why I'm standing down as a journal referee

by Blog Admin February 1, 2012

Concerned that his field is completely beholden to closed access publishers, **Matthew Todd** *calls an end to his time as a referee and author for Elsevier journals and joins over 2,500 academics who have signed an online petition in an effort to push for open access publishing and the transformative benefits that they see lying behind the ability to tinker, re-mix and play with open data.*

I've decided to stop refereeing for, and publishing in, Elsevier journals. I was just asked to review for Tetrahedron Letters (Tet Lett) again, and sent notice that I'm out:

> *"Apologies, but I have decided to stop refereeing for (and publishing in) Elsevier journals because of 1) the lack of a positive policy towards open access (to all content, not just individual articles) and 2) Elsevier's aggressive commercialism, in particular its sponsorship of the Research Works Act in the United States which would unquestionably harm science. Please remove me from your list of referees.*
>
> *If Elsevier were, in the future, to decide to support full open access to the academic literature I'd be delighted to resume refereeing duties."*

Over the last few years my interest in open science has grown, and inevitably I've had to confront the power of open access literature, which is a necessary condition for open science if we are to avoid the absurdity of research conducted in the open disappearing behind a subscription once it's done. My doubts about contributing to a system of closed access journals, which totally dominate organic chemistry, were becoming overwhelming when Tim Gowers' post came along about the need to declare publicly that we would no longer support the system.

I'm starting with Elsevier. The tipping point was the ridiculousness of the Research Works Act – a squalid little affair that was very little to do with the greater good or the benefit of science. I have been irritated by all the pompous talk of the "value" Elsevier adds to the process of peer review. Over the last ten years or so I have had experience of the peer review system operated by three or four organic chemistry Elsevier journals. I'd like someone to point out something about this "value" that is innovative or surprising and which might need some hefty R&D budget. Is it perhaps the case that simply publishing an article written and reviewed by scientists has become fairly straightforward in this modern age?

I have been an editor at PLoS One for a while now – ironically a journal that some people still think has no peer review system. The peer review I have managed for papers there (managed by scientists, backed up by editorial staff) has been rock solid, lengthy and rigorous. I have zero data to back this up, but it feels as though more people reviewing for PLoS One care about what they're doing than do those reviewing for some of the Elsevier organic chemistry journals. PLoS One is also trying hard to innovate in the area of article-level metrics.

As a chemist, parting company with Tet Lett in particular causes mixed emotions. The journal has a weak reputation amongst my co-workers and colleagues these days, but of course there are classic, beautiful papers in there. My last paper there from 2009 has been cited 20 times already. My first paper was published there. I feel like holding a wake. But good science is not the product of a journal, it's the product

of hard work by people. The last thing we should be doing is paying anyone over the odds to access it back or giving anyone copyright over it. A sad day, but times change which is why times are interesting.

If you want to join the boycott, you can declare yourself here. You'd be in very good company, in case you think this is just a list of naïfs.

Eventually I will have to take the same stance on other publishers, with the American Chemical Society looming large. I need to consider the welfare of the students in my group, and their CVs. It's really very tough in chemistry – people expect papers in certain places. The ACS is technically a learned society, and has a healthy contribution to the blogosphere but something about its control of the literature just doesn't feel right. If the data in Scifinder were donated to the public domain chemistry would have its Human Genome Moment.

My last two papers were in ACS journals because these were the most appropriate places for the students' work, and because the prestige of the journals helps my students. They were both thoroughly reviewed and published quickly. But this just can't go on, and I suppose I must soon stop interacting with the ACS too: One step at a time. With the bigger journals that deal with significant papers and publish items beyond research articles the sense of "value added" is perhaps clearer, too, and the discussion becomes economically more complex. Yes, I'm talking about you, Stuart – if Nature Chem went author-pays, it'd be ($ a lot) per article, I seem to remember.

I'd be interested to hear from other chemists. It feels our discipline is the most traditional, and almost completely beholden to closed access publishers. It feels we care less about open access than scientists from other disciplines, and that we're too comfortable with our lot. Comfort is the death knell of academia. We perceive the transformative benefits of open access to data too little, in particular the re-use and mining of large open data sets: the immense power of tinkering, re-mixing, playing. The lack of unrestricted play with the accumulated knowledge of chemical reaction outcomes is one of the key weaknesses of the way we are doing organic chemistry today. For that we need open data. That means open access to the literature.

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